

## No One Gets Left Behind, or Forgotten. by Mika\_Mouse

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/M, Gen, M/M, Other, There will be romance, also there will be a lot of jumping around time-wise, but will be more about the relationships and friendships that I think need more screentime, there might be some angst in the future but for now its all fluff, they deserve happiness dammit

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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**Summary:**

“This is my family. I found it, all on my own. It's little, and broken, but still good. Yeah, still good.”

A series of one-shots focusing on the life and times of a makeshift monster-hunting family. Because you can't walk away from multiple traumatic events with a group of people and not be bonded for life.

## 1. El & Hopper - 1985

**El & Hopper**

**May 1985**

“Can you tell me about Sara?”

Hopper stopped cleaning the dishes, and looked over his shoulder at the young girl sitting at the table. She was in the middle of doing her English homework.

“You wanna know about Sara?”

El shrugged, putting down her pencil. “You never talk about her. Except for...”

Hopper nodded quickly as El trailed off. They don’t talk about that day. No one does. Even after half a year of peace, it’s still painful to think about.

“Well that’s the thing, kid,” said Hopper, wiping his soapy hands on his jeans and taking a seat across from El. “Sara was so young when she passed, most of her life was taken over by her illness.”

“What about other than her being sick?”

“Well...” Hopper swallowed, a lump forming in his throat. “She was a hopeless romantic...a lot like you. She loved Anne of Green Gables, you know. The book I used to read to you? She loved the thought of ‘kindred spirits’, and having a bosom friend just like Diana Barry. And everything kind of larger than life. She loved the solar system. Learning about the different planets and galaxies. I think knowing there was so much out there excited her. I remember for her fifth birthday her mom and I bought her one of those shitty kid telescopes. You could barely see anything with it, but she loved it so much. I used to take her out almost every night to look at the stars.”

Hopper paused to gather his bearings, and then continued. “And then

she got sick. Really sick, really fast. I barely had a chance to comprehend what was happening. And then she was gone.”

A small hand reached across the table to hold Hopper’s. He glanced up at El, to see her eyes shining with tears. It was only then that he noticed he was also crying. He quickly wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

They sat in silence, simply holding each other’s hand. It was a couple of minutes before El spoke, in such a whisper that Hopper almost didn’t hear her.

“I wish I could have met her.”

“Me too, kid,” Hopper chuckled, squeezing her hand. “Hey, why don’t you take the rest of the night off, huh? We can make some popcorn, watch a movie? We haven’t done that in a while.”

El looked at her homework warily. “I need to get better at English to get into high school with everyone else.”

“El, you’ve been working so hard lately. You deserve a break,” Hopper said, standing up and rummaging through the cabinet. He emerged with a pan of Jiffy Pop popcorn. El eyed it eagerly.

“Besides, you still have awhile before the test. I’ll make sure to whip you into shape before then.” Hopper grinning at her cheekily, which El returned, jumping out of her seat and quickly storing her work away. “You choose the movie, I’ll make the popcorn.”

“Extra butter!” El exclaimed, to which Hopper replied, “I know what to do.”

El leaned down by the TV, where her modest collection of tapes lived. Hopper had surprised her with a VHS player that Christmas, and the boys and Max pulled their money together to get her a couple of movies, in order to make her last year in hiding as pleasant as possible.

“Did you pick a movie?” Hopper asked, settling down on the couch with a bowl of popcorn. El turned around, showing him the cover of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Hopper sighed, shaking his head. “You hang

out with those boys too much.”

“Max gave me that one,” El said simply, collapsing into the space next to Hopper, and immediately grabbing a handful of popcorn.

“Yeah, yeah.” Hopper chuckled, ruffling El’s hair. Her hair, though as wild and curly as ever, was past her chin now, and she mostly kept it up out of her face with Sara’s hairtie.

Hopper gazed down at El fondly. If anyone had told him two years ago that he would have an adopted daughter, he would have laughed in their faces. Two years ago, just the sight of a child made him nauseous, so bitter of the thought that they had everything his own daughter never would. And now, here he was. Sitting on the couch with a young girl just on the brink of her teenage years, and him finding himself wanting to protect her and give her everything she could possibly want and need. So, this is what he’s been missing out all these years, huh? If so, he could definitely get used to it.

El wriggled into Hop’s side in excitement as Luke used the force to retrieve his lightsaber and escape from the wampa. She looked up at him. “Are you paying attention?”

“Yeah,” Hopper laughed, grabbing a handful of popcorn for himself.

El settled herself deeper in the crook of Hopper’s arm. He was like a giant teddy bear, radiating off heat. El had never felt so comfortable with a grown man. He was nothing like Papa, who was cold and distant, or the men in white uniforms who never spoke to her and dragged her around like a doll. No, he was good and comforting and *there*. The man who took her from the forest and gave her a bed. The man who never asked her to use her powers, and apologized when he yelled. The man who gave her big bear hugs and kissed her hair goodnight. Is this what a father is meant to be like? If so, she could definitely get used to it.

## **2. The Party - 1989**

### **The Party**

**June 1989**

“Shit! Shit shit shit shit!” Steve cursed, slamming his car door shut and took off, sprinting down the parking lot. He was so late. Why did he take so much time on his hair?

“Shit!” Steve continued to curse as he ran down the hallway, passing by a horrified woman, covering her giggling son’s ears. “Oops, sorry Mrs. Cannavali!”

“Watch your language, Mr. Harrington!” the woman barked back as he continued to sprint towards the gym.

He threw open the gym doors at the moment he heard Principal Foster announce, “Byers, William!”

Still small for his age, but thankfully no longer sporting the bowl cut, Will Byers walked across the stage, slightly tripping over his robes, shook Principal Foster’s hand, and took his diploma.

“YES! THAT’S MY SON!” Joyce screamed through the cheers as Hopper wolf-whistled and Jonathan took a million pictures.

Will blushed a deep red, waved embarrassingly at his family, and waved excitedly at Steve as he attempted to subtly navigate his way through the bleachers.

“Sorry, sorry,” Steve muttered, as he squeezed by the Sinclairs, the Hendersons, the Wheelers, and then finally collapsed in between Hopper and Jonathan, who was still snapping shot after shot as Will made his way back to his seat.

“What took you so long?” Nancy asked, talking around Jonathan as he continued to take pictures of his brother. “We were afraid you were gonna miss it.”

"I lost track of time," Steve said, and Jonathan finally peeled himself from his camera, and raised his eyebrow, taking one look at his hair. "What?! I wanted to look good for the occasion."

"Yeah, okay man," Jonathan laughed. "It's good to see you though."

"You too," Steve laughed, giving his friend a one-armed hug, while simultaneously squeezing a beaming Nancy's hand. "When did you guys get in?"

"Midnight last night," Nancy said, looking guilty. "I had a final in the morning, so we left as soon as I was finished. We would've phoned you if it was any earlier –"

"I know," Steve grinned. "I'm just happy to see you guys. Hawkins is so boring without you."

"Oh, c'mon," Jonathan laughed, "How can you be bored? You have \_"

"Henderson, Dustin!"

At the sound of Dustin's name, Steve and the four families leapt to their feet again, cheering as loud as they could as Dustin, who had miraculously left his hat at home, sauntered up to the stage. Upon collecting his diploma he turned to them and blew them a kiss. Steve laughed loudly as Jonathan captured the moment on film.

The group barely had a time to rest before –

"Hopper, Jane!"

Petite and willowy, El glided up to the stage, her chestnut hair curling elegantly down her back. She looked up to the loudest section of the bleachers, her eyes glassy, and beamed at her cheering family.

"THAT'S MY GIRL!" Hopper bellowed, as Joyce sobbed shamelessly into a Kleenex. The family next to them edged away slowly.

Clutching her diploma, El mouthed, "I love you!" before hurrying back to her seat, high-fiving Dustin once she got there.

And that's how the rest of the ceremony went. One by one, Max, Lucas and Mike finally took the stage, and for each of them, the group jumped to their feet and yelled as loud as they could, Jonathan taking pictures so fast that by the end of the night he would have used up almost all of his film.

As soon as the ceremony was over, they took to the gym floor to congratulate the newly graduated high school students. They found Will, Max, Lucas and Dustin pretty easily, as they chattered excitedly about finally graduating.

"Congrats man!" Steve yelled, capturing Dustin in a tight embrace, before locking Will, Max and Lucas in an equally tight bear hug.

"Thanks!" Dustin laughed. "Don't think I didn't see you get here late though, man."

*"He had to look good for the occasion,"* Nancy mocked good-naturedly, giving Max a one-armed hug. "Hey, has anyone seen my brother?"

"Where do you think?" Lucas laughed, nodding behind Nancy.

Mike, having shot up significantly since he was fourteen and now towered over El, was twirling his girlfriend around. The two were locked in such a tight embrace, that they didn't see Hopper march towards them.

"Hey! You two!" he barked, and they broke apart at once. "Enough of that."

Mike, still pretty intimidated by Hopper, grew red and stuttered, "Sorry, Chief." El, however, rolled her eyes good-naturedly and hurried over to give her dad a tight hug.

"You did good, kid," Hopper whispered, pressing a quick kiss to El's hair.

"Thanks, Dad," El whispered back, tightening her hold.

Now that Mike was free, Nancy rushed over and pulled him into a hug. Pulling back, she beamed up at him, squeezing his elbow. "I'm so proud of you."

“Thanks Nance,” Mike grinned.

“HEY EVERYONE!” Dustin yelled loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “Jonathan wants a group picture of all the graduates!”

The teenagers rushed forward, laughing loudly and tugging on each other’s caps. Max, who was talking swiftly with her mother before waving her family off, hurried over and flung her arm over El’s shoulder.

By the time Jonathan was done taking pictures, Mrs. Henderson had left with Dustin’s uncles, and the Sinclairs and Wheelers bid the group adieu, leaving the teens with Hopper and Joyce.

Steve, Nancy and Jonathan pulled the adults to the side as the graduates chattered and continued to hug each other excitedly.

“So we want to take the kids out tonight,” Steve said. When Hopper narrowed his eyes, he quickly added, “Just to the woods for a little bonfire.”

“It’ll just be the nine of us,” Nancy pitched in. “Just a night to be together.”

Hopper pursed his lips with hesitation, but Joyce looked up at him. “It would be nice to have the house to ourselves for once.”

“Okay,” Hopper said after a moment’s thought. “But I want them home at a decent hour. And keep an eye on those two.” He nodded at El and Mike.

And that’s how Steve found himself, once again, babysitting this group of shitheads. Only this time, they were eighteen.

The sun was setting as they started their fire, and Nancy pulled out marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers. They all sat in comfortable silence as they roasted their marshmallows, before Will spoke up.

“Can you believe it’s been almost five years since...”



He didn't finish his sentence, but everyone knew what he was talking about. Max and Lucas exchanged worried glances, and El grabbed her stepbrother's hand.

"You're okay now," she said quietly, smiling at Will.

"Thanks to you," he smiled back. "Thanks to everyone here."

The group fell into another comfortable silence, only to be interrupted whenever someone needed a graham cracker. Every so often someone would lock eyes with another member of the party, and would share a secret smile. Because they knew. They would always have each other's backs.

### **3. Mike & Max - 1984**

#### **Mike & Max**

**November 1984**

El was alive. She was alive and asleep in the other room. And Mike, after three hundred and fifty six days, could finally breathe.

It was approximately 2:30 in the morning and he was sitting in an armchair in the Byers' living room. It had been around an hour since Hopper brought El back to the house before immediately leaving again (dragging Steve along with him, after the party's insisting that he needed more than a couple band-aids for his wounds). Apparently he had Dr. Owens in the bed of his truck, still alive and in need of hospital treatment.

Will and his mom were sleeping in Joyce's room, Nancy and Jonathan were in his room (gross), El had taken Will's room, and Dustin and Lucas were out cold on the couch.

Mike wasn't sure how anybody could sleep after what had transpired that day. His eyelids were becoming heavy but every time he closed his eyes all he saw were demodogs – demodogs coming at them from every angle, demodogs ripping Bob apart, El getting overpowered by a hoard of demodogs, Will turning into a demodog...

There was slight movement coming from the kitchen, and Mike whipped his head toward the noise, only to see Max. The only other person determined not to fall asleep. She was sitting at the kitchen table, resting her legs on the chair opposite her. Every so often, her head would fall back, but she would catch herself, and pretend that she wasn't about to succumb to her exhaustion.

Mike stared at her for a couple of seconds before making his mind, getting up and walking over to her.

“Mind if I join you?”

Max started, before realizing it was Mike. She nodded toward the seat next to her. "Be my guest."

Mike took the seat. "So...how are you?"

Max laughed. "For just learning about a creepy government conspiracy and almost getting killed by some weird ass alien monsters? I guess I could be worse."

"Right..."

They sat in uncomfortable silence before Mike spoke up again. "I'm really sorry."

Max stared at him. "For what?"

"For being an asshole."

Max laughed. "You're gonna have to be more specific."

Mike smirked. "You know, for not accepting you. The only reason why I didn't want you in our party was because I was jealous. You haven't been around this entire time, but for a whole year, I've been pretty...not myself. Because —"

"Because El disappeared," Max nodded. "I gathered."

"Yeah..." Mike said, putting all his focus on tracing a knot on the kitchen table. "So when Dustin and Lucas were trying to get you to join the party, I didn't like it. Because it felt like you were replacing her."

"I would never replace El," Max said sincerely, her eyes glistening. "And I totally get it. I saw the way you looked at her."

Mike snapped his head up. "What?"

"Oh, c'mon," Max laughed, crossing her arms. "Are you gonna look me in the eye and tell me that you're *not* in love with her?"

Mike gawked at her. "I'm *thirteen*."

“So?”

“So!” Mike’s face was deep red at this point. “I don’t know if it’s even possible to fall in love this young.”

“Oh please,” Max laughed. “I’ve seen you two together for maybe a whole twenty minutes and already I can tell how much you two love each other. You waited a whole *year* for fuck’s sake – ”

“Three hundred and fifty six days,” Mike muttered.

“Exactly my point.” Mike glared at her, but Max only grinned back smugly.

“Oh yeah? What about you?”

“What about me?” Max said innocently.

“Do you like Lucas or not?”

At that, Max blushed furiously and Mike grinned at her triumphantly. “Shut up, Wheeler.”

Mike laughed, getting up from the table. “You’re alright, Zoomer. Welcome to the party.”

Max stared at him, a smile forming on her face. “For real?”

“Yeah,” Mike shrugged, extending his hand. “I think you earned it, after tonight.”

Max grinned, jumping up and shaking his hand enthusiastically. “You won’t regret this.”

“I better not,” Mike smirked. “Get some sleep, Max. You can take my chair.”

And with that, Mike silently made his way to Will’s room where El was sleeping. As he quietly shut the door behind him, Max snorted, making herself comfortable in the armchair. *Not in love, my ass*, she thought as she drifted into a deep sleep.

## **4. Lucas & El - 1985**

### **Lucas & El**

#### **February 1985**

“Lucas? What is Valentine?”

Every weekday, one member of the party would come to the cabin after school with a copy of all their homework and go through it with El. It all started after Christmas, with the kids begging Hopper to be granted regular visitation rights. Not long after, Joyce pointed out to Hopper that if El were to go public in the next year, she needs a proper education, not just a dictionary. By the beginning of the new semester, the new system was set in place. Every week, the five friends would visit the cabin in turn, always at random, just incase. El would learn at the same speed as her friends, be given similar tests – usually supervised by Nancy - and, on occasion, be graded in her progress. So far, it seemed to be working quite well. It turned out El was exceptionally bright and eager to learn. It was a good thing her friends were a bunch of nerds.

On top of that, El was much happier about staying in the cabin all day. Sure, she was still in hiding, but at least she could look forward to a friend coming to visit her every day. In Hopper’s book, it was a win/win.

Usually, El would have a string of questions for the visitor that day, mostly about confusing interactions she saw on a soap, or a weird word in a commercial. Sometimes her questions would result in funny reactions, such as when Mike’s face went beet red when she asked about why people on TV kiss much longer than they do, or when she asked Dustin what a “time of the month” meant, which left him giggling for the rest of the day.

It was around mid-February when El started noticing that commercial breaks were dominated with ads about something called “Valentine’s Day” or “Valentine” and everything was pink and floaty with lots of hearts. She thought it looked really pretty, but had no idea what it all meant.

Luckily Lucas was her visitor that day, and Lucas generally didn't get giggly or weird when she asked questions – he would just tell her straight up. So she didn't hesitate, and blurted out her question the moment he stepped into the cabin.

“A Valentine?” He repeated. She nodded eagerly. “Well, Valentine's Day is a holiday, like Halloween or Christmas. But it's about celebrating love.”

“Love?” El repeated.

“Yeah. Has anyone explained to you what love is?” El shook her head, and he sighed. “Oh boy.”

“What?” El said worriedly. “Is love bad?”

“No, it's just complicated.” Lucas hesitated before grabbing El by the wrist and guiding her to her room. On her nightstand, she had multiple framed pictures. He grabbed them all and knelt down by her bed, motioning for her to do the same.

He first set down the picture of her and Hopper outside the cabin. Joyce had taken it the day Hopper came home with El's birth certificate. The one that read ‘Jane Hopper’, physical proof that she and Hopper were now family. “First kind of love is familial love.”

“Fam...ilial?”

“Family love,” Lucas explained. “It's the kind of love you have for Hopper, or for love you have for your mom. It's unconditional. Like, no matter what, you will always care for them.”

El nodded in agreement.

Lucas grinned. Next to it he set a picture of the whole party at the Snow Ball that Jonathan took. It was right after El and Max had officially become friends, so they were linking arms. Mike stood right behind El, his hand on her shoulder, looking happier than he had in a year. Lucas stood next to him, behind Max, and next to Dustin, probably laughing at something Dustin said. Will stood next to Max, grinning brilliantly. El beamed down at the picture.

“Friend love is a lot like familial love. We’re not actually family, but we could be. We’d do anything for each other, we care for each other when we’re down, and we don’t lie to each other.”

El nodded eagerly. She knew all of this already. And now she had a name for the bubbly feeling she felt when she looked at her friends.

Lucas set down the final picture. It was a school picture of Mike from a couple years back – his face was still round and his hair was brushed to the side as if Karen Wheeler had been attacking it to stay that way just a few seconds before the picture was taken. It used to live in the Wheeler living room, and Karen had caught El looking at it multiple times during the one time she was a proper visitor, that she had given it to her as a present.

The corners of Lucas’s mouth twitched before he started up again. “The last kind of love is arguably the most important kind of love. It’s definitely the kind of love that’s celebrated during Valentine’s Day.”

“What is it?” El asked, smiling affectionately at Mike’s picture. She felt it again – the kind of tightening in her chest whenever she looked into Mike’s eyes, or counted the freckles on his cheeks, or even when he just walked into a room.

“Romantic love,” Lucas explained. “Romantic love is different than familial or friend love because there’s usually only room for one person to love in this way. This person that you love romantically is your favorite person. The one that you want to be around all the time and kiss and stuff. Do you get it?”

“Yes,” whispered El, still staring at Mike’s picture, while Lucas broke into a huge grin.

“So, do you think you love Mike?”

“Yes,” El said immediately, and Lucas’s grin got, if at all possible, wider. She looked up at him and smiled too. “Do you love Max?”

And for the first time, Lucas didn’t answer her question. Instead, he spluttered and got really red, standing up suddenly.

“Oh, uh – I don’t – too early to –”

El smiled, watching Lucas trying to stammer out an explanation. She decided it was kind of funny to see Lucas – grounded, reliable Lucas – all flustered.

“Lucas,” she said gently, and he stopped stammering. “It’s okay. Do you want to get started on homework?”

Lucas sighed with relief and grinned. “Yeah. Probably a good idea to get started before the Chief gets home, anyway. Anyway, we did a really cool science experiment in class today I can’t wait to show you! Do you have any potatoes we can use?”

And with that, he gathered the picture frames, placed them neatly back on El’s nightstand and headed back to the living room where he left his backpack.

El followed him, her head swimming with the thought of the three kinds of love. It’s amazing how just a couple years ago, she knew nothing about love, and now she suddenly has all three.



## 5. Hopper & Joyce - 1986

**Hopper & Joyce**

**March 1986**

Everyone knew there was something going on between Hopper and Joyce. Hopper knew. Joyce knew. All the kids knew. Even Eleanor Gillespie knew, just by spotting them having a conversation in front of the hardware store one evening during the holidays.

If everyone knew there was something going on, why didn't Hopper do anything about it? El asked him that a couple of weeks after Valentine's Day. That day, she and Mike went to the diner and shared a milkshake, then took a long walk and held hands. Hopper sat at home after a long day at work and drank four beers.

"Why didn't you ask Joyce to be your Valentine?" El asked him over dinner.

Hopper looked at her over his casserole. Joyce had started bringing leftovers by their place when she realized that they still have been living mostly off of frozen food.

"What're you talking about, kid?"

"I know you like Joyce the way I like Mike," El said, staring at him daringly. "Why are you choosing to not be with her?"

Hopper furrowed his brow in contemplation. Normally El would make some offhanded remark about him and Joyce and he could easily ignore it or change the subject. This was obviously not one of those times.

He took a swig of beer before delving into an excuse. "I don't have time for a relationship, kid. I have work and you to take care of –"

"Bullshit."

Spluttering, Hopper began to choke on his beer. He stared at his innocent fourteen-year-old daughter in shock. “Where did you learn *that* word?”

“Nancy,” she said simply, and Hopper threw his hands in the air in defeat. Did *all* of these damn kids have to curse like sailors?

“I have school now,” El continued as Hopper wiped the spilt beer off the table. “I have a life. You should be able to, too.”

Hopper gazed at her in surprise. “When did you become so wise?”

“I’ve always been,” El said, at which Hopper laughed. “If you’re worried that Will and Jonathan won’t like it, don’t. We talk about it a lot. We want you to be happy.”

“*Really?*” Hopper couldn’t believe that his kid and Joyce’s kids were talking about them. But El didn’t explain further. She only nodded and returned back to her casserole, leaving him to his thoughts.

If everyone knew there was something going on, and El, Will *and* Jonathan were somehow on board with the whole thing, what was stopping him? He wasn’t *scared*. Jim Hopper doesn’t get *scared*.

He was still deep in thought when El finished her dinner, stood up, nudging him, silently asking him if he was done. He nodded, and she took the dishes to the sink.

“Hey, kid?” Hopper said after a few minutes.

“Yeah?”

“I think I’m gonna take a drive for a bit. Do you think you’ll be okay by yourself for a couple hours?”

El grinned to herself as she finished washing the dishes. “Yeah. Take your time.”

And that was how Hopper found himself driving silently down the road that took him to the Byers’ house at 8 at night. He clicked his tongue nervously as he mulled over what he would say when he actually got there.

He rolled up to the Byers house and killed the engine, willing himself to get out of the truck and knock on the door. But he simply sat there. Is this *really* a good idea? Things are good now...*really* good. He has El and they're happy and finally safe, and the Byers' are finally beginning to put the Upside Down behind them. He and Joyce had a good relationship – they always looked out for one another. When she had a late shift he brought her a sandwich and they ate in the parking lot. When *he* worked late she picked El up from school in addition to Will and kept her safe at the Byers until he got off. Every week or so she would come by with a box of Jonathan's leftover's, insisting that "El can't live off of frozen food forever, Hop, and honestly neither can you." Whenever Will had a particularly bad nightmare (which was happening less and less), Hopper would be there in a second to comfort him and Joyce. Sometimes he and El would come over to the Byers' and they would all have dinner together and watch a movie.

Yeah, things were *really* good. Maybe too good to risk. Hopper made to turn the engine back on, but as he did the Byers' front door opened and a petite woman walked out, carrying several fat trash bags.

She noticed Hopper's truck in front of her and cocked her head. "Hop? You in there?" she called.

Hopper hesitated before opening the truck door and getting out. "Yeah, it's me."

She threw the trash bags in the can in front of her before hurrying out to meet him. "What're you doing here? Is El okay? Are you okay?" she asked hastily, pulling his face towards her to check for injuries.

"Everything's fine," Hopper assured her. "I – uh..."

Joyce stared at him, her eyes smiling at him the way they always do. She still had her hands cradling his face.

Hopper sighed and placed a hand on top of one of her own. "Fancy a smoke?"

The tips of Joyce's mouth curled and she nodded. They settled on the

hood of Hopper's truck and smoked in silence for a couple of seconds before Joyce spoke.

"Kinda brings you back to high school, huh?" she laughed.

"Yeah," laughed Hopper. "Only we're twenty-something years older and I'm thirty pounds heavier." He nudged Joyce. "You haven't changed."

They grinned at each other.

"How's Will?"

"He's good," Joyce said. "His fifteenth birthday is in a few weeks."

Hopper nodded. He knew that. Somehow in the last couple years, he started internalizing weird little facts about El's friends. Only about a year before that he barely knew their names. Now he knew that Lucas was allergic to shellfish, and Max was scared of heights, and Dustin's favorite place was the Indianapolis Zoo, and Mike secretly loved to write.

But he knew the most about Will. He knew that drawing acts as a form a therapy for him. He knew that his favorite food is spaghetti and meatballs and his favorite drink is Hi-C. He knew that sometimes he still wished that his dad wanted him.

Hopper took another drag of his cigarette. "Do you have anything fun planned?"

Joyce smiled. "Actually...he requested you."

"What?" Hopper looked down at her in disbelief.

"Well, you and El. He would really like it if you two came over and had a birthday dinner with us."

"Really? He doesn't want to hang out with his friends and have a party?"

"They're planning on spending the weekend at the arcade, but since his birthday falls on a school night this year, he wanted to do

something quiet the day of.” She flicked her cigarette butt into the dirt. “What do you say?”

His heart fluttered. “I would be honored. I’m just surprised that he wants to spend his birthday with me.”

“Oh Hop,” Joyce said. He glanced down at her. Her eyes were smiling at him again, glistening in the moonlight. “I hope you know how much you mean to the boys. And to me.”

“You mean a lot to me, too,” Hopper replied, his voice low. He couldn’t take his eyes off of hers – they were dark and shiny and beautiful. So, so beautiful. He found himself leaning closer. It was like a gravitational pull that he had no control over. She slowly leaned closer as well, her gleaming eyes never leaving his.

It felt like eternity as they inched towards each other, but before Hopper could comprehend what was happening, their lips met. And suddenly, he was seventeen again, sneaking off during math class to meet the most beautiful girl under the bleachers. They were smoking Camels out in the parking lot during the Homecoming game, and making out in his car at Lover’s Lake.

And then, he was in his cabin watching Joyce teach El all about lady stuff. He was sitting in the Byers’ living room, sharing a bowl of popcorn with Jonathan and laughing at *Leave It To Beaver* reruns. He was standing at the end of an aisle, watching the most beautiful woman dressed in white walk towards him...

Their lips parted. After a moment, Hopper opened his eyes to see Joyce’s dark, beautiful ones staring back at him.

“Wow,” he heard himself whisper, and her mouth twitched upwards.

“Wow,” she repeated, her smile growing before pulling him towards her again.

During Will’s birthday dinner, they announced, to the kids’ delight, that they were kinda-sorta together. Hopper was quick to say that they were taking it slow, and to not make a huge deal over it.

They didn't take things slow. The Byers family and Hopper family officially became one household by the end of the year.

## **6. Nancy & Jonathan & Steve - 1984**

### **Nancy & Jonathan & Steve**

#### **November 1984**

Nancy Wheeler was hardly ever the subject of hot gossip at Hawkins High School. She was quiet and docile, a straight-A student, and nice to everyone. She spent most of her time in the library or hanging out with her select few friends to ever make any sort of trouble.

There were two times she was in the spotlight at Hawkins High; the first time happened a year ago when she and king-of-campus Steve Harrington started fooling around with each other. You could ask anyone on campus and they would all say the same thing – they were together, then they weren't. Then someone spray-painted “Starring: Nancy the Slut Wheeler” on the town's movie theater marquee. Then, Steve Harrington and Jonathan Byers got into a fistfight downtown. By the next day, however, it was as if nothing had ever happened. By the end of the semester, Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler were back together and Jonathan Byers slipped back into anonymity.

The second time happened a year later, the week after Tina's Halloween party. There were rumors the Friday before that Nancy and Jonathan Byers took off together, having both skived off last period on Thursday and all of Friday. The rumors were confirmed to be – sort of – true, as Sheila Everly, the school gossip, spotted Jonathan and Nancy pulling into the school parking lot together early Monday morning. And just like that, before the bell for first period could ring, reports that Nancy Wheeler had dumped Steve Harrington for Jonathan Byers traveled throughout the whole school.

Steve Harrington casually walked into first period Pre-Calc five minutes late; his pretty face was bruised and battered, just as it was a year before when he and Jonathan fought outside the movie theater. But then, something weird happened. Steve ignored his seat next to Ricky Andrews, and proceeded to take the empty desk in the back of the class next to Jonathan Byers.

Sometime between Thursday and Monday, Steve Harrington and Jonathan Byers became friends. Maybe they weren't chummy in typical teenage-boy fashion, but they kept to themselves, shared answers, and every so often exchanged secretive glances.

To make matters even stranger, the rumors were true. Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers *were* together. It was confirmed when they were seen sneaking a kiss between periods. But that didn't stop Steve Harrington from sitting with the couple at lunch.

It was all very peculiar. The situation had left the school in such a state of confusion that they hadn't even noticed that Billy Hargrove had mysteriously gone missing.

It was during the last period of the day, English, when Steve Harrington felt a sharp prod on his arm. He looked to his right to see Sheila Everly, definitely not silently reading and dissecting *Frankenstein* as Ms. Dalloway instructed, but staring point-blank at him.

*"Can I help you?"* Steve whispered, feeling slightly irritated.

*"What's going on with you, Harrington?"* Sheila whispered, a little louder than expected, and Steve jerked his head in the direction of Ms. Dalloway's white curly head to see if she heard.

Steve curled his toes. *"What're you talking about?"*

*"I'm talking about you going from king of the school to lame dude third-wheeling his ex and her new boyfriend."*

Steve stared at her. *"You don't know what you're talking about."*

He turned back to his book, but Sheila poked him again with one of her sharp claws. *"Would you stop that?"* Steve growled, giving her a pointed look.

*"Something's up with you, Harrington,"* Sheila hissed, still as loudly as one could get while whispering. She was attracting the attention of nearby classmates. *"What happened to your face? Did your buddy, Jonathan beat you up again?"*



The bell signaling the end of the day rang. Bristling, Steve promptly packed up and left without another word, with Sheila hot on his tail.

“Why won’t you just talk to me, Steve?” Sheila asked. She was practically jogging to keep up with him as he sped-walked towards the exit. “You’ve been acting different for like a whole year – ditching Tommy H. and Carol and now you’re friends with the school freak? It’s not like you–”

“Okay, I’m gonna stop you right there,” Steve said, stopping in his tracks and turning to look down at her. “You don’t know me. I know you think you do because you like to stick your nose in everyone’s fucking business, but you have no idea who I really am. And you don’t know Nancy or Jonathan, either. Just because they don’t give a shit about what everyone in this godforsaken school thinks about them, it doesn’t make them freaks. They’re good people. They care about things that really matter, and you have no *idea* what they’ve been through – ”

He paused, pinching the bridge of his nose and breathing in heavily. “Just...leave my friends alone, okay? I guarantee you, a year from now you won’t give a shit about this school or anyone here.”

Sheila stared at him, affronted, and - for once - at last lost for words. Without another word, Steve turned on his heel and pushed through the doors that led to the parking lot.

After a couple seconds, Sheila followed him outside, just in time to see Steve trying to usher a hoard of what looked like four or five middle-schoolers into his car. They were all loudly arguing over the seating arrangements.

“Hey!” Steve barked loudly, in a voice Sheila could only describe as one her mother would use. “The longer you argue, the longer she’s waiting for you. Just squeeze in the back, it’s not that long of a drive.”

The curly-haired kid with a baseball cap slid into the passenger’s seat, grinning toothily, as the rest of the kids clambered into the back. As soon as a redheaded girl, who Sheila recognized as Billy Hargrove’s stepsister, took her seat and slammed the door shut, Steve peeled out

of the parking lot and drove out of sight.

## **7. Max & El - 1984**

**Max & El**

**December 1984**

El had been at the Snow Ball for about ten minutes before catching sight of Max by the punch bowl. She was with Lucas, Dustin and Will. They were all laughing at a story Dustin was telling, as he comically waved his arms around.

“We should say hi,” Mike said in her ear. They had just finished their last dance.

“O-okay,” El said and allowed Mike to drag her towards their friends. She wanted to see Lucas, Dustin and Will, but her and Max were still in rocky territory. She didn’t know why, but whenever she saw Max she felt angry.

“El! You made it!” Dustin yelled, bounding towards her and gathering her up in a huge bear hug.

“Yes!” she laughed, returning the hug. Dustin released her, allowing Lucas and Will room to give her a hug as well.

“Hi, El,” Max said, waving from the punch bowl.

“Hi,” El said, waving back.

The group fell into uncomfortable silence, Lucas and Mike exchanging looks. They had attempted to mend the weird rivalry between Max and El once before – the Monday after everything had happened, Hopper allowed the party to visit the cabin. El greeted everyone with enthusiasm, except Max. The entire visit, she simply pretended the other girl wasn’t there. Ever since then, Max chose not to accompany the boys on their rare visits to the cabin.

“El, do you want some punch –?” Lucas began to ask, before Max interrupted.

“Hey El, do you want to go to the bathroom with me?”

El raised her eyebrows. “Go to the bathroom with you?”

She looked pointedly at Mike, who nodded. “Girls like to go to the bathroom in groups. I don’t know why.”

El hesitated before nodding. Max smiled and led the way to the girl’s bathroom, El following silently.

Despite the packed gym, the bathroom was empty. El stood awkwardly by the door and twiddled her thumbs as Max jumped onto the sink counter, silently situating herself.

El gestured towards the stalls. “Don’t you need to go to the bathroom?”

Max swung her legs. “Oh, no. That’s just an excuse girls like to make when they wanna talk in private.”

“Oh.” El glanced down at her new shoes. “You want to talk.”

“Yeah.” Max pursed her lips. “I think I know why you hate me.”

El looked abashed. “I don’t hate you.”

“You don’t have to lie. I can tell,” Max said. “It’s because of the party, right? You’re scared that I’m replacing you in the party.”

El remained quiet, not quite sure what Max meant by that. “Party?”

“Yeah. Mike told me all about it. You’re their mage. You don’t have to worry. I could never replace you. I was just hoping I could...you know. Be an addition.”

Max glanced at her hopefully. El was furrowing her eyebrows. “Mike said?”

“Yeah. You know, Mike’s their paladin, Will’s their cleric, Dustin’s their bard, and Lucas is their ranger? You’re still their mage...and I was hoping I could be their zoomer –”

“Do you like Mike?” El suddenly blurted out.

Max gawked at her. “Do I like Mike?”

“Yes. Do you like Mike?” El repeated, with more confidence.

Max stared, realization dawning on her, and a grin beginning to form on her face. El continued to glare at her with a sort of brazen certainty. “You think I like Mike?”

El blinked, confused. “Don’t you?”

“I mean, Mike is pretty cool and he’s a good friend, but, no. I don’t like him. Not in the way I’m assuming you do?” Max said, smirking. El stared at her, taken aback.

“But...I saw. In the gym. He smiled and held your hand.”

“What?” Now Max was confused. “When did Mike ever hold my hand?”

“Before,” El said. “I got mad. I flipped you off your board.”

Max stared at her before bursting out laughing. “That was *you*?”

El looked guiltily to the floor again as Max laughed. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I get it,” Max said, grinning. “If I were you I’d probably do the same thing.”

“I was...being stupid,” El said, still staring at the floor.

“No, you were just jealous,” Max said, waving it off casually.

“Jealous?”

“Yeah, jealous,” Max said, grinning. “It’s when you feel mad or sad at someone because you want whatever they have.”

El nodded. “Yes. I was...jealous.”

Max smiled. “But now you see there was no need to be jealous, right? I don’t like Mike in that way and Mike *definitely* doesn't like me. I

actually..." her face grew red, "...I like someone else. In that way."

"Really?" El said eagerly, and Max's face got even redder. "Who?"

"It's...nothing important."

"Max," El said, and Max looked up at her. "Friends don't lie."

"Well," Max bit her lip. "It's Lucas."

A smile quickly formed on El's face. "You like Lucas?" she said, now grinning.

"We're getting off-topic," Max said, her ears burning. "Anyway, are we cool?"

"Cool?" El repeated.

"Yeah. Can we be friends?" Max said, jumping off the counter and extending her hand.

El smiled, grabbing her hand. "Yes. We're friends."

"Great!" Max grinned, shaking her hand. "I'm glad. You're...pretty awesome, El."

"Bitchin'?" El asked, and Max looked at her in shock before throwing her head back and letting out a laugh. El laughed too, finding Max's laugh contagious. Still chuckling, Max linked El's arm with hers.

"Yeah, bitchin'."

"You're pretty bitchin' too," El smiled. "I...like your board."

"My skateboard?" Max smiled as El nodded. "Thanks. My dick of a brother broke it, but I'm asking for a new for Christmas. I can teach you how to ride one sometime."

El nodded eagerly and Max grinned. They left the bathroom to find the boys. "Ellie," Max yelled over the music, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

El stopped her in tracks. "Ellie?" she asked.

Max pursed her lips. “Yeah, like a nickname for El? Is it okay if I call you that sometimes?”

“Ellie,” El said, smiling. She nodded. “Yes. I like it...Maxie.”

Max wrinkled her nose as El looked at her hopefully. “...*Only* you can call me that. Okay? If I hear that coming out of any of the boys’ mouths, I’ll kick their ass.”

El smiled. “Promise.”

## 8. Nancy & Mike -1986

Nancy & Mike

April 1986

*No more secrets, okay? From now on, we tell each other everything.*

It takes them two near-death experiences involving inter-dimensional monsters to enforce said promise. The first time, it's broken immediately. The second time, it sticks.

The Monday after everything happens, they're caught in a long, awkward dinner as Karen Wheeler grilled them about their weekends.

"Forgive me if I want to know what's going on in my children's lives," she had simpered, washing her dinner down with a glass of white wine. Nancy catches Mike's eye, and they silently agree to keep quiet.

After dinner, Nancy ushered Mike into his room, sat him on his bed, and tells him everything she had been up to for the past couple of days. She even tells him about what happened with Jonathan, although a *very* edited version.

When she's done, he tells her everything he had been up to. He tells her about Dart, the vine drawings, the lab, Bob, Billy, and the tunnels. He even tells her that okay, yeah, maybe he *does* like Eleven.

"Mike," Nancy had snorted, "Anyone with eyes could see that you like Eleven."

And just like that, the floodgates were open. After the initial embarrassment of admitting that he had a crush faded, Mike suddenly felt comfort in the fact that he could now go to his sister for advice.

It turns out, to Mike's surprise, that there are *way* more pros than



cons to having your sister be deeply involved in your personal life. Because Nancy, as infuriating as she can be sometimes, was an indispensable source of knowledge.

Over breakfast his first day of high school, they went over the teachers (*"Don't sit in the front row in Mr. Kopalski's class unless you want to be drenched in spit"*), fellow classmates (*"Avoid Jimmy Brewer and Daryl Cohen, they love to pick on Freshmen, especially giant nerds like you"*), and the school in general (*"Never go behind the gym, that's where all the druggies hang out. I'm serious, Mike, if I catch you there I'll beat your ass"*).

In the wake of Mike and El's first real fight, Nancy burst into Mike's room at 8 AM on a Saturday morning, demanding that he fix it (*"I don't care whose fault it is. You're gonna go to her and apologize right now, Michael Wheeler. I can't believe how stupid you're being"*), and on the morning of their first real date, she (*déjà vu*) woke him up early and began throwing clothes at him to try on, while simultaneously spitting words of wisdom (*"Don't try too hard okay? She already likes you. Just be yourself, hold her hand, pay for the movie and lunch. You'll be fine. Now stop slouching."*)

Nancy proves herself to be a dependable confidant, and- for the most part – restrains herself from teasing her brother too much about Eleven. She finds that she likes being an active part of her brother's life, and it puts her mind at ease knowing he wouldn't hesitate in confiding in her if he were in any sort of trouble.

One Friday afternoon in the beginning of April, Nancy receives a letter. An acceptance letter, from Columbia. Her dream school. A school that's hundreds of miles away from Hawkins.

The Wheelers go out to dinner that night to celebrate. Karen spends the whole dinner tearing up and gushing, *"my baby is all grown up,"* while pressing many kisses to an incredibly embarrassed Nancy's hair.

The next morning, in typical Nancy fashion, Mike is shaken awake at an ungodly hour.

“What the hell?” Mike said grumpily, pressing his face into his pillow. “It’s Saturday. Go away.”

“Hurry up and get dressed,” Nancy said, pulling his comforter to the edge of his bed. “I’ll be in the car.”

“What for?” Mike croaked, but Nancy was already out the door. He groaned, relishing in the warmth of his bed, before rolling out of his bed and onto the floor.

By the time Mike willed himself to get dressed and head outside, Nancy was indeed sitting in the old Buick – Ted had gifted it to her when he had gotten a fancy new company car.

“Took you long enough,” Nancy commented as Mike slid into the passenger’s seat.

Mike shot her an exasperated look, and she smirked back, turning on the ignition and backing out of the driveway.

“Where are we going?” Mike asked, as they sped towards the outskirts of town.

“You’ll see.”

They sat in silence for about fifteen minutes, music quietly playing in the background. Mike recognized it as one of Jonathan’s mixtapes.

Mike’s eyes were beginning to droop when Nancy suddenly took a turn onto a dirt path, jerking him awake. They bounced along for a couple minutes before Nancy pulled into a wide, open field.

“What’re we doing here?” Mike asked.

Nancy didn’t answer him. Instead, she pulled a key from her pocket and unlocked the glove compartment.

Mike’s eyes grew wide. Lying in front of him were two identical revolvers.

“Uh...did you take me out here to kill me and bury my body, Nance? I mean, I know I annoy you sometimes, but –”

“Ha ha,” Nancy said sarcastically, grabbing a revolver and the box of ammunition sitting in the corner of the glove compartment. “C’mon, grab the other one.”

“Er...” Mike eyed the gun warily. He’d never held a gun before. “Maybe you should...?”

“It’s not loaded, you idiot. Just pick it up and follow me. I’m gonna teach you how to shoot.”

And with that, Nancy jumped out of the car, pulled a bag out of her backseat, and wandered over to a cluster of tree stumps to unload her bag.

Mike gawked at her. *Where* was this coming from? He picked the gun up gingerly and hurried out to meet her.

“*Finally*. Okay, first you gotta learn how to load a gun. Follow my movements.”

Mike carefully mimicked Nancy’s movements, his hands shaking a bit. “So...um. Are you ever gonna tell me *why*, exactly, we’re doing this?”

Nancy shrugged, her eyes never leaving her gun. “I’m gonna be leaving for college soon. I just wanna make sure you’ll be okay.”

“So you’re teaching me how to shoot a gun?”

“I mean... just in case. If something happens.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Mike carefully positioned the chamber back into place, his throat tightening. It was his worst nightmare, the reemerging of the Mind Flayer, or the return of the bad men. In every scenario he mulled over in his head, he was always a useless bystander, watching El being taken by Brenner, or Will being overpowered by the Upside Down, or another member of the party being taken down by a demodog.

Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to learn how to use a gun. To protect. To *fight*.

"Okay, see those cans I put out there? Try and hit one."

Mike raised the revolver, feeling quite foolish, like he had no business holding a gun. The cans sitting on the stump suddenly seemed much farther away. He aimed as well as he could for the middle can and, cautiously, pulled the trigger.

He missed.

Mike pursed his lips and glanced at Nancy, half-expecting her to tease him about it, but she merely shrugged and waved her hand.

"Not bad for your first try. Try choosing only one eye to aim and use your gun as an extension of that. Here, watch me."

She focused on the cans in front of them, closed an eye and pulled the trigger. The can on the left flew off its stump.

Mike stared at his sister in awe. "You come out here a lot, then?"

"When I can," Nancy replied, lowering her gun. "I used to come out here every week, when things were still on edge. Nowadays... whenever I wake up early enough. Just to keep myself prepared. *Also*, it's pretty good stress relief."

"You never told me about this," Mike said, almost accusingly.

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?" smirked Nancy. "Try again."

Mike aimed again, this time with one eye shut like Nancy did, and took another shot. He missed the can, and instead hit the tree stump it was sitting on

"Pretty good," Nancy said. She sounded impressed. "You're better than Jonathan, that's for sure."

"Jonathan does this with you?" Mike raised his eyebrows. "Is this what you guys do on dates?"

"No," Nancy snorted. "I guess I never told you, but this is what we did the first time. Before we went hunting for the Demogorgon."

"Wow," Mike said. Sometimes he forgot how much of a badass his sister really was. He took another shot and missed completely.

He glanced at Nancy. "Did you tell Jonathan yet? About Columbia?"

She grimaced and shook her head. "He's still waiting on scholarships and financial aid from NYU. If he doesn't get enough..."

"He'll still want you to go," Mike pressed. "He'll understand."

"But I wouldn't." Nancy shifted her balance. "Notre Dame is a perfectly good school. And I would be closer to home, so I can check up on Mom, and you wouldn't be alone--"

"This is your dream school. You have to go."

Nancy looked at him, surprised. "I didn't know you cared so much about where I went to school, little brother."

"I just want you to be happy. And I know you'll be happy at Columbia."

Nancy blinked, her eyes glassy.

"Oh my god, don't cry!"

"I'm not!" Nancy laughed, but still wiped her eyes with her forearm. She nodded at the gun at Mike's side. "Try again."

This time, the can jumped completely off the stump and into the tall, dead grass. Mike grinned, his heart pounding.

"You did it!" Nancy exclaimed. Then she said, in her best Karen Wheeler, "*My baby is all grown up!*"

"Ugh, stop!"

They laughed good-naturedly, then Mike continued his target practice. It took the rest of the bullets in both his and Nancy's guns to

finally get the last can off its stump. But it was a start.

They were about a couple minutes into their drive back to the house, when Mike spoke up.

“You’re going to Columbia.”

Nancy stayed silent for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, I’m going.”

Mike sat back in his seat, grinning, satisfied with himself.

Nancy nodded at the glove compartment. “I want you to have one of those. Just in case, okay? Keep it locked somewhere safe. Only use it if you’re in real danger.”

Mike nodded, his eyes following the white mailbox they were speeding past. “We’ll have matching guns,” he mused.

Nancy laughed. “Just like those terrible Christmas sweaters Mom used to make us wear.”

They grinned at each other, and Nancy elbowed Mike in the arm.

“I’m proud of you, baby brother.”

Mike smiled to himself as he looked out the window.

“I’m proud of you too, Nance.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry, I don't know anything about guns!

## 9. Dustin & Steve - 1987

Dustin & Steve

April 1987

“Dustin? What the hell are you doing here?”

In the past couple of years, it had become quite common for Dustin (or any of his little friends, for that matter) to show up unannounced at Steve’s doorstep. Ever since they became friends in 1984, they would go to Steve for advice on just about everything – relationships, hair, clothes, sports, anything. So Steve normally wouldn’t question random appearances of frazzled high-schoolers on his porch. Only this time it was midnight on a Wednesday.

“I don’t know what to do, man,” Dustin said, wringing his hands and marching into the house. He looked as though he’d been biking around for hours, his nose and cheeks pink from the night air. “I’m freaking out!”

“Whoa okay, hold on! What’s going on? Are you okay? Is everyone okay?” Steve’s heart began to pound wildly as he locked his front door and immediately went for the coat closet, where his nail bat lived.

“Shit – sorry! Nothing like that. Can you put that away?” Dustin eyed the bat warily.

“Jeez, don’t scare me like that!” Steve said, sighing in relief. Things have been quiet for a while now, but Steve couldn’t help but feel constantly on edge. He lowered his weapon and tossed it back in the closet. “Well, if it’s nothing Upside Down related, what’s this all about?”

“My dad’s back,” Dustin blurted out, a wild glint in his eye.

Steve stared at him in disbelief. “Your dad? The one who left you and your mom for that gold digger? The one who stopped visiting you

when you were ten? The one who ignored a year's worth of letters? *Him?*"

"The very same."

Steve curled his hand into a tight fist as he felt a hatred boil up for a man he never met. That fucker...how *dare* he...

"What did he say?"

"He says he wants a relationship with me," Dustin said. He threw his arms around wildly as he spoke and began pacing the floor. "He says he sorry that he left and that he wants to spend time with me."

Steve exhaled deeply, took a hold of Dustin's sweatshirt, marched him into the living room and sat him down on the couch. He took the armchair next to him, and then said, "What did *you* say?"

"I said I would think about it?" Dustin grimaced. "Obviously my mom doesn't want anything to do with him. She wouldn't even look at him when he showed up. And normally I wouldn't either, but I don't know...he's my *Dad*, Steve. And..." Dustin paused, biting his lip, "He offered to pay my college tuition."

Steve groaned, running a hand through his hair. He knew how much of a bind Dustin and his mom were in, regarding college tuition. His mom had taken double shifts to add to their college fund, and Dustin had been looking into summer jobs to save up.

"It's so tempting to take it, y'know?" Dustin continued. "I would be covered, all four years, and housing too. But I can tell it's killing my mom. She doesn't want to be tied to him in any way."

"So don't take it," Steve said. "Tell him to fuck off."

"But...the tuition..."

"Look man, if you want to spend time with your dad, I'm not gonna be the one to stop you. But you shouldn't feel like you owe him anything. Look, I'll help you out. I have enough money to chip in. And when the time comes, I'll help you apply for scholarships and student loans."



Dustin gaped at him. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Yes!” Steve jumped up. “Look at me – I’ve been house-sitting while my parents have been traveling for what, a year now? I don’t have to pay rent, I have a steady income. I can do this, and I *want* to do this.”

Dustin hesitated. “I don’t want to be a burden to you, Steve –”

“You wouldn’t be,” Steve said, a determined glint in his eye. “Let me do this for you. Please.”

Dustin gaped at him a little longer before leaping up off the couch and pulling Steve into a tight hug. “You really are the best person in the world, you know that right?”

“I know,” Steve laughed, clapping Dustin on the back. “But seriously, don’t even mention it. And if you need any backup with your dad, just say the word and I’ll be there.”

Dustin squeezed his shoulder before pulling away and beaming at him. They were about the same height now. *Shit, they grow up so fast*, Steve thought fondly.

“I think I wouldn’t mind just having lunch with him. And telling him I don’t need his money.” Dustin hesitated. “Do you think...?”

“Say no more. I’ll be there.”

Dustin sighed in relief, the sort of crazed, panicked look in his eyes finally gone.

“Hey, while I’m here I wanted to talk to you about Cynthia Jenkins –”

“Oookay,” Steve said, taking a hold of Dustin’s shoulder and steering him to the front door. “You know I would love to have a chat about Cynthia Jenkins and all, but it’s 12:30 in the goddamn morning on a school night –”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m all wired now –”

“—I’ve got an early morning tomorrow, and I know you have that Bio test, so why don’t you go home and get at least a little bit of sleep

and we can talk about Cynthia tomorrow? After school."

"Oh fine," Dustin said, as Steve pushed him out the door. "See you tomorrow. And, Steve? Thanks."

Steve grinned. "Any time."

**Notes for the Chapter:**

This one's pretty short, but I felt it necessary to acknowledge the absence of Dustin's dad, and how Steve is filling that void :)

## 10. Will & El - 1984

Will & El

November 1984

It was too bright.

Will groaned, scrunching his eyes closer together, as he tucked his face in his arms. He felt as though he had been hit by a semi-truck, then dragged across the floor a couple hundred feet. His head pounded heavily, and there was a sharp pain in his side.

“Will?” he heard a soft, concerned voice above him, and his regretfully opened his eyes. For a moment, it was all just light. He blinked, and a kind face swam into view. “Will, *can you hear me?*”

“Mom?” Will groaned, still squinting in the sunlight.

“Oh, Will,” Joyce sighed in relief, reaching out to clutch his hand. She was sitting at the foot of his bed, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, looking as if she hadn’t slept in days.

“What...happened?” Will said, struggling to sit up in bed. “What time is it? What *day* is it?”

“It’s Monday...1:15,” Joyce said, taking a look at her watch. “You’ve been asleep for almost thirteen hours.” She looked at him, still with concern in her eyes. “How’re you feeling, baby?”

“Awful,” Will said truthfully. “But, I’ve been worse.”

Joyce chuckled, squeezing her son’s hand. “Do you...remember much? Of what happened?”

“No,” Will said, furrowing his eyebrows and blinking furiously. “I remember...Hopper. In the tunnels. And pain. A trap. Stories. The gate...and The Clash.”

“The clash?” Joyce repeated, confused.

“Yeah,” Will said. “*Should I Stay or Should I Go?*”

Joyce laughed quietly, running a thumb over Will’s knuckles. Jonathan had insisted on playing that song, hoping that it would somehow help Will communicate with them. As always, he was right. Joyce looked up at Will’s eyes. They were back to their original hazel color, wide and concerned.

“Is everyone else okay?” he asked. “Hopper?”

“Everyone is fine. All your friends were here. They wanted to stay and wait til you woke up, but they had to get to school.” She paused, biting her lip. “Hopper’s still here though. And...Eleven.”

Will’s eyes widened. “Eleven? She’s back?”

“Yeah,” Joyce smiled. “She’s back. She closed the gate. She saved us all.”

“She closed the gate?” Will repeated. “It’s over?”

“I think so,” Joyce said, now grinning.

A wide grin spread across Will’s face. He suddenly felt 100% better than when he woke up. His body was still sore and the pain in his side was throbbing like a steady heartbeat, but he suddenly had a burst of energy, a feeling of euphoria that he hadn’t felt in at least a year.

“I want to see her.”

Joyce nodded. “She’s resting in your room.” It was only then that he realized that he was lying in his mom’s bed. His drawings of the vines were still taped all over the walls. “Do you think you can get up?”

Will nodded eagerly. Struggling slightly, he got out of bed, with Joyce’s hand on his back. Despite him being possessed by an other-worldly demonic being, he was able to walk with barely any trouble to his room, where he found Hopper reading a book to a curly-haired girl.

She was sitting on his bed, on top of the covers and propped up against some pillows, wearing pajamas she had gotten from Joyce and thick, knobby socks. There were dark circles under her eyes and her damp hair curled around her neck, but other than that she looked just as Will imagined her.

“El? Eleven?” Will found himself saying.

The girl smiled. “Will.”

She sounded exactly the same. Suddenly, it was like he was back to the Upside Down, huddled in Castle Byers, alone and scared, when he heard a soft, comforting voice. *Will. Your mom...she's coming for you. Just hold on a little longer.*

Hopper jumped up at once, closing Will's copy of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and setting it on his bedside table. “Hey, kid,” he said, gesturing for Will to take his chair. “How're you feeling?”

“Better,” Will said, struggling a little to take a seat. “How about you? You almost died.”

“What?” El said, looking up at Hopper, alarmed.

“Almost,” Hopper said, looking pointedly at El. He glanced back over to Will. “I'm fine. Don't worry about me.”

“How're you feeling El?” Joyce asked. She was leaning against the doorframe. “Are you kids hungry? Thirsty?”

“I'm pretty hungry, actually,” Will said, glancing at El, who nodded in agreement.

“Eggos?” she asked eagerly.

Hopper chuckled and Joyce smiled. “I don't think we have any Eggos, but we can make actual waffles. With syrup and butter. How does that sound, sweetie?”

El nodded. Joyce gave her a small smile and left the room, dragging Hopper with her, leaving Will and El finally alone.

They sat in silence for a bit, El sitting up more and crossing her legs. They exchanged glances and smiled.

“Y’know,” Will said, finally breaking the silence. “You look just as I imagined you would. Your hair’s a bit longer...but other than that, the same.”

“Really?” El said, in the same soft voice.

“Yeah.” Will hesitated, but began to get out of his chair. Wincing a little, he went to his desk to look through a pile of drawings. He found the one he was looking for, and went to sit at the foot of his bed, across from El, then passed the paper to her.

El gazed down at the paper, her eyes growing wide.

The drawing was incredibly detailed, as if Will had gone over it multiple times throughout the year, continuously adding details as they came to him. It was a colored pencil portrait of a pretty young girl in a pink dress and a blue jacket. Her hair was short, buzzed to her scalp, and she had a look of innocence to her. Her wide, doe eyes stared from the page into El’s.

“Me?” El said, staring at the drawing in awe.

“Yeah, you.” Will said, shifting nervously. “Do you like it?”

El gazed down at the drawing, her fingers carefully running over the page. “Pretty,” she murmured, and Will broke into a huge grin.

El looked up at Will, her eyes wide with wonder. “You did this?”

“Er...yeah,” Will said modestly. “It’s kind of my thing. Do you like to draw? Or...have you ever had the chance to? Draw, I mean?”

“A little,” El shrugged. “Not like this, though.” Her fingers continued to run over the page - the face was a little shorter than her own, and she thought that drawing-El’s eyes were much prettier than hers could ever be, but it was her. It wasn’t her, but it was her.

“Maybe some other time...we can draw together? It’s fun. And calming. And we can share my crayons.”

El nodded eagerly. "Yes."

"Okay! Great!" Will grinned. He breathed heavily for a moment, staring down at his comforter. "El, I just have to say thank you. For everything. For saving me...and everyone I love."

There was no reply. He looked up to see El's eyes glistening with tears. "El?"

"Not everyone," she whispered, a tear running down her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"W-what do you mean?" Will asked, his chest tightening in panic.

"Your mom's Bob," El choked. "I couldn't save him. Too late. Gone."

Will stared at her, mortified. "Bob? He's...gone?"

El let out a sob in reply. "I'm sorry," she repeated, ducking her head.

Will felt a tear drop to his cheek as he grasped El's hands with both of his. "Hey, hey! El." She looked at him, her lip quivering. "You shouldn't be sorry. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

El gave him a hesitant smile as tears continue to fall. "None of this is your fault either, Will."

Will bit his lip and looked guiltily away. "I...don't know about that."

"Will," El said confidently. He looked up at her. "It isn't your fault."

Will nodded slowly, reaching up to wipe his cheeks. "Thanks. Maybe I'll come to believe that one day. I just...sometimes I wonder..." He trailed off, an overwhelming sensation of guilt flooding over him.

El tightened her hold on Will's hand, her eyes looking at him with the same purity Will had depicted in his drawing. She gave him a soft smile. "I understand."

Will returned her smile, squeezing her hand back in response. It was strange. He barely knew El, but he knew without a doubt that she really did understand. Maybe it was because he knew what she'd

been through, that she's seen the Upside Down like him. Or that his friends talked about her nonstop for a whole year that he feels like he knows her already. Maybe it was just the sincerity in her eyes.

Just then, a loud rumbling noise erupted from El's stomach. They stared at each other and began to laugh.

"Maybe we should check and see if the waffles are done," Will suggested. El, still giggling, nodded and made to get out of Will's bed.

"Can you walk okay?" El asked, concerned, as Will winced trying to get up.

"Yeah," Will said, "It just kinda feels like someone stabbed me in the stomach."

El hurried forward and placed a steady hand at his elbow.

"Thanks," Will said, leaning into her slightly. They grinned at each other and, together, made their way to the kitchen.



## 11. Mike & Hopper - 1984

### Summary for the Chapter:

Mike has an important question for Hopper.

Mike & Hopper

December 1984

“Hop? The young Wheeler boy is here to see you.”

Hopper’s head snapped up, his brows furrowed, as if he had imagined what he had just heard. But Flo was indeed at his doorway, nonchalantly sipping on a cup of coffee, and waiting for a response.

“Uh...sure. Let him in, Flo,” Hopper said. Flo nodded and her head disappeared from the doorway. Hopper lifted his feet off his desk and stamped his cigarette out as Mike entered and hovered by the doorway, tall and gangling with his thumbs hooked through his backpack straps.

“Chief,” Mike said, nodding shortly.

“Mike,” Hopper said tentatively, eyeing the boy awkwardly shifting his feet. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s lunchtime.”

Hopper nodded slowly. He highly doubted that middle-schoolers were allowed to go off-campus for lunch, but he decided to let it slide. “How can I help you?”

“Um,” Mike was seemingly getting redder and redder by the minute. He whispered, “It’s about her.”

Hopper stared at Mike, who now resembled a tomato. He sighed and stood up. “Let’s take a walk, yeah? Leave your backpack here.”

He strolled out of the station, Mike following silently behind him. The air was thick and awkward between them, Hopper very aware that this was the first time they've been alone since Mike screamed at him, punched him, and had a complete meltdown in his arms. Sure, they had been in each other's company a few times since then, as Mike and the rest of his friends came to visit El as often as Hopper allowed, but they would simply nod in greeting and that would be that.

Hopper walked towards a cluster of trees, far enough away from the station that he was sure no one could overhear their conversation, and turned to face Mike, who was silently mouthing something to himself.

"Okay, what's going on?"

"Er –" Mike was turning red again. "I wanted to ask you – uh – for permission? I guess, I mean –"

"Spit it out, kid."

"Would it be okay if El went to the Snow Ball with me?" Mike burst, almost shouted.

Hopper stared at him. "The Snow Ball?" he repeated, and Mike blushed again.

"Yeah. You know, the winter dance at Hawkins Middle? It's in a couple weeks. I was wondering, er, hoping, that you would let her go. With me." Mike looked up at him hopefully.

Hopper furrowed his brows. "I don't know, kid," he said hesitantly, "You know how dangerous it is for her to be out in public right now \_"

"I know," Mike nodded eagerly, "But it would only be for a few hours, and we would never leave the gym, and you could wait for her right outside if you want–"

"Look, Mike," Hopper said, rubbing the inner corners of his eyes tiredly. "I understand, I really do, but even just a few hours could jeopardize everything..."

"She could arrive late and leave early," Mike suggested, his tone growing desperate. "Only the kids and some chaperones would see her. *Please.*"

"I know this is frustrating, Mike. I get it. How about next year?"

"Next year we'll be in high school, and they don't have a Snow Ball," Mike said, his voice growing higher, and his eyes getting glassy. "It *has* to be the Snow Ball. I *promised* her the Snow Ball –"

"What?" Hopper said sharply. "You promised her she could go? Before asking me?"

"This was before you," Mike spat. "Before she...disappeared."

Hopper froze. *Oh.*

Suddenly it makes sense, why this shitty middle school dance means so much to this boy on the verge of tears in front of him. This was a promise he'd been waiting to fulfill for over a year. To a girl he thought might be dead.

Throughout the year Hopper had hidden El, he caught on that the word "promise" meant more to her than it ever did to him. Like the time he had promised her he would buy more Eggos when they ran out, and then forgot to pick some up before coming home, so she gave him the silent treatment for two whole days. Not to mention the whole Halloween fiasco.

It looks like he finally learned who taught her the importance of the word "promise".

"Look, kid," Hopper said, taking a seat on a stump and gesturing Mike to sit next to him. "If it were up to just me, I would absolutely let her go to the Snow Ball. But it's dangerous for her right now. I just don't want her to get hurt."

Mike nodded dejectedly. "I understand," he sniffed.

"Now, I'm not saying no..." Hopper said. Mike lifted his head up and looked at him hopefully. "I'm not saying yes, either. This is a maybe. I'll have to check with Dr. Owens and see if there's a way we can get

El a night out. Lord knows she deserves it."

A smile began to grow on Mike's face. "Really?"

"Yes," said Hopper hesitantly. "But with all those conditions, okay? She gets there late, leaves early, and I'll be waiting in the parking lot."

"Yeah!" Mike exclaimed, straightening up and grinning.

"And – ugh – no funny business, okay? Ever." Hopper grimaced. He was beginning to sound like every dad of every girl he ever dated in high school, but he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't say anything. "You treat her with respect. No pushing her to do anything she's uncomfortable with, or doesn't understand, you got it?"

"Oh! O-of course," Mike said, growing scarlet and avoiding eye contact. "I would never do anything like that."

"Mmhmm," Hopper grumbled. "You say that now, but I know how teenage boys' minds work. I *was* a teenage boy."

"Trust me. I would *never* do anything to hurt her." Mike hesitated before blurting out, "I love her."

Well, shit.

It's not like Hopper didn't see this coming. In fact, it was pretty obvious. It didn't stop him from hoping, though, that they could just stay kids. He was *not* emotionally prepared to deal with a lovesick teenage girl.

"I know what you're gonna say," Mike continued when Hopper didn't say anything, but instead started to pay way too close attention to the worm wriggling in the dirt at his feet. "That I'm too young to know what real love is, but I've had an entire year to think about this, and I do love her. I do. And I guess you're kinda her dad now, so you should know that I will do anything to protect her, and I will never hurt her. I want her to be happy forever."

Hopper nodded. He was becoming increasingly more uncomfortable

by the second. The worm he was watching burrowed itself into the ground and out of sight. "Well, okay then," he grunted.

"And I get why you did it," Mike continued, speaking at a rapid pace. It was as if he had bottled up every emotion for a year and now that he had expressed one he couldn't stop. "I get why you kept her a secret. You needed to keep her safe from the bad men. I hid her in my basement for a whole week and didn't tell my parents, so in a way we kinda did the same thing."

Hopper gruffly chuckled at that. "Kinda," he agreed.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you. And punching you," Mike said sheepishly. "I shouldn't have done that."

"No...kid, you had every right to," Hopper sighed as he absentmindedly dug his boots into the dirt. "I wish I didn't have to keep her from you for so long. I'm sorry, Mike."

Mike nodded, and for the first time in a while, turned to look at Hopper. The moment their eyes met, Mike quickly turned away and immediately burst into tears.

Hopper stared at him, horrified. He didn't know what to do. He knew how to argue, how to yell, and be disciplinary. He didn't know how to console...especially not the boy who was trying to date his - dare he say it? - daughter.

Awkwardly, he patted Mike's heaving back. At his touch, Mike immediately turned and curled into Hopper's side, his tears rapidly seeping into Hopper's uniform.

Hopper silently rubbed Mike's back as he continued to cry, guilt washing over him. It was his fault (okay, maybe not entirely, but definitely partly) that this boy was, again, sobbing into his shirt.

Hey, if El was gonna love a boy, she could do a lot worse than Michael Wheeler. He internally decided then that, no matter what Dr. Owens said, he would get El to that dance. It was, after all, the least he could do.

"You're alright, kid," Hopper murmured. He wasn't even sure if Mike

could hear him over his sobs. “You’re alright.”